

**WTE column of May 30, 2015. Editor's headline: "The mystery of being loved."  
CST of same date: "A message from someone unreachable."**

When our public radio station broadcast the Cheyenne Symphony Orchestra's recent performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, I settled with a T. C. Boyle novel, thinking to read as I listened. Many years ago, offered admission to the writing program where he teaches, I deemed Boyle my mentor. His characters drink to excess and relentlessly chase after sex, which may speak to their author's proclivities; still, I admire his fiction for its biting social commentary.

Nevertheless I soon dropped Boyle to concentrate on listening. Here was Beethoven, washing over me in waves of elation, a sense of being at home in the world, the mystery of feeling loved. When Schiller's "Ode to Joy" thundered forth as chorale--Beethoven borrowed the young dramatist's poem for his symphony--I couldn't help wonder: How did the composer manage to write thus? In life, Ludwig van Beethoven was a deeply troubled individual. (Both Beethoven and Schiller, by the way, were born, and posthumously feted, not far from my second childhood home, a township in Swabia.)

Beethoven repeatedly fell in love with women who, in the rigid social hierarchies of his day, were all but unreachable. The short piano piece "Für Elise" tells the story. Elise's parents would have considered Beethoven, her music teacher, their servant. (The name "van Beethoven" is a Dutch derivative that does not denote nobility.) Hence, Elise's preordained fate was an arranged marriage to some minor aristocrat.

The other day I was asked to reflect on how I got started as a columnist back in 2011. The short answer is, a dictum arrived--You must examine your life--in the gaze of someone unreachable.

It happens, he resides in North Carolina. He is married and, in his professional life surrounds himself with buxom beauties. Recalling his many nubile assistants, to this day I cannot fathom what possessed him to make eyes at me. But he did, and the gesture provoked responses that continue to surprise me. That year, fellow enrollees in Leif Swanson's LCCC Creative Nonfiction writing class bemusedly critiqued my moon-struck soliloquies.

First off, visions kept recurring of ending the celibate state that's been my lot for more years than I care to count. Second, I thought that passion at this late stage would attain in suitably sedate fashion. Was I in for a surprise! A child/adult duality worthy of psychoanalysis disrupted retiree life.

Erich Fromm comes to mind, psychoanalyst and social philosopher whose words are living legacies. After commenting that all our lives we try to achieve things, be productive, seek entertainment—even love has to produce results--Fromm urges us to remember

"It is possible, even desirable and, above all, pleasurable, to exercise a kind of love in which being, not consuming, plays the key role, a love in which the only thing of importance is the act of loving itself."

That's well and good, but the body in love is an unruly child. It screams, "I want, I want" to beat the band. It rattles your cage with its tantrums, drives you up the wall, broadcasts desire to the four winds. It wants no truck with celibacy; it demands pleasure. It keeps you up nights, often in wonder, sometimes in despair. In the midst of upheaval, you're humbly grateful for the surprise of joy, forgiveness that arrives at odd moments, that unexpected empathy with the child. You're at a loss what to do with the excess energy at hand.

Writers and other artists often believe that creativity requires regular priming with sex and liquor. Unfortunately, the approach eventually turns against the body that clamors for it. William Styron's memoir "Darkness Visible" speaks to the point. As the author of such acclaimed works as "Sophie's Choice" and "The Confessions of Nat Turner," Styron's confessional reflections issue stark warnings. Strike that option.

Listening to late Beethoven I wondered at the bad hand life had dealt him. Painful as it must have been to love the unreachable Elise, his loss of hearing, at a time when he earned his living conducting an orchestra not unlike the Cheyenne Symphony, must have been devastating. A well-documented anecdote has him continuing with his baton one evening, long after the piece was over and his musicians had fallen silent. How did he transform sorrow into celebrations of joy?

Composing the Ninth, did he glimpse—albeit unidentified—Frommian principles? Discover moments of pleasure in an otherwise tormented and solitary existence? Were his choices far-flung decisions to love, "Für Elise" writ large, as it were, which sweep up listeners in almost cosmic forces of generosity and forgiveness? Surely at such times he reconciled with fate, or God, or life in general.

Similarly in keeping with Fromm, the prosaic output of yours truly sometimes converts excess energy into the occasional cheer of joy—and pleasure.